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Angela McClanahan

## Introduction: Future North

Both the BANK art collective poster that appears on the cover of this issue of *Visual Culture in Britain*, as well as the image below, featured in the 1999 'Field of Dreams' exhibition at Norwich Gallery in southern England (Figure 1). These posters, one of which explicitly references the fact that the scenes depicted are geographically located in an imaginary 'northern' location in the UK, were shown alongside a series of large

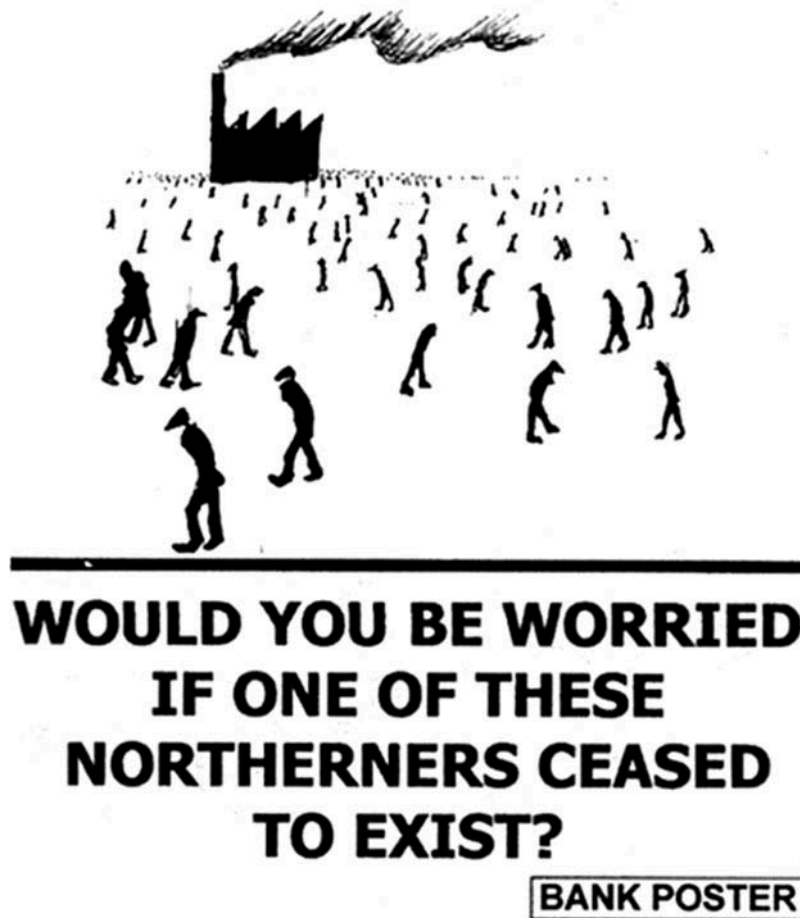


Figure 1. 'Would you be worried if one of these northerners ceased to exist?'  
© 1999 BANK.

magenta, orange, red and yellow Rothko inspired landscapes, each speckled with swarms hundreds of Lowry-esque, figures, their hands behind their backs and their heads pitched forward. In the distance, a number of factories belch out the smoke of burning coal.

Whatever their location in space, time or the imagination, these places are presented as unforgiving: polluted, possibly overwhelmingly toxic. The factories might be read as northern iterations of Dante's Hell, or William Blake's famed 'satanic mills', the dark, malevolent structures whose daily operations were driven by corruption and greed of early capitalism during the first phases of the industrial revolution. In his 1804 poem 'Jerusalem', which is heavily imbued with radical Christian and humanist principles, the 'dark' mills epitomize the urban and northern industrial landscapes of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, which characterized humankind's stewardship of a world driven by power and the overt exploitation of an expanding working class in pursuit of wealth accumulation. Their existence is a result, the poem implies, of Enlightenment principles and human 'reason' judging God to be fictitious and redundant, and is an inevitable consequence of allowing supposed human rationality (with 'human nature', of course, in Christianity ultimately rooted in individualist drives for wealth and power) free rein to govern social and economic action. In the poem, this human-made hell is contrasted sharply with the temporary 'heaven' that is created by Jesus when he visits England during his second coming.

The BANK depictions of the human figures in these paintings and posters are workers: minimalist representations of physically weary, flat-capped male 'northerners', their lives characterized by manual graft and acrid living conditions, both at work and at home, as famously described in Friedrich Engels' *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. All these images, especially when considered along with the title of the show, are ambiguous. How they relate to the historic moment in which they were produced, and what they might mean in terms of the social, economic and cultural practices that characterize 'the north' today is not straightforward.

This is precisely why it is worth revisiting this particular series of works now. Their imagery, unlike many historic depictions and descriptions of industrial landscapes and, to a certain extent, contemporary photographic imagery that engages with northern industrial locations in the UK,<sup>1</sup> is not romantic or exotic. Their visual cues point to how the legacies of the industrial revolution problematise how the region has been represented both as 'provincial' over the 20th and into the 21st century in art and popular culture, typified by Lowry's matchstick figures, but also how that view of the region exposes the hypocrisy of 'Thatcherite views of Little England' (BANK, 2006, pg. 102). The images ask us to question entrenched assumptions about the north, its historic and contemporary cultural, social and economic conditions, who 'northerners' are, how 'the north' is represented and understood now, the conditions of everyday life there and even what 'north' is in real and abstract terms.

Is 'north' defined primarily by national boundaries or are northern 'regions', as discussed by Penny Fielding in this issue, produced by particular kinds of cultural practices and dispositions, political allegiances and nineteenth- and twentieth-century class histories? What of the border regions between England and Scotland? How are northern and southern England 'divided'? Is the north best exemplified by industrial heritage, as explored by Louise Thody in relation to the history and contemporary appropriation of one of its best-known export products? By working-class regions in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Tyne and Wear and Strathclyde, whose populations, even today, are assumed to retain certain kinds of 'traditional' leftist values related to manual labour and workers' movements and traditions of self-education as examined by Paul Rooney below, or the stewardship of land (especially in Scotland)? Is the north rural? Urban? Male? Primarily white or multi-racial? Are its politics and worldviews going to be for ever shaped by the incredible production power, resource consumption and unprecedented social organization of labour of the industrial revolution, by the incredible temporal scale of modern nuclear power, as explored here by David Barrowclough, Bryan McGovern Wilson and Robert Williams, by the legacies and transformations of English capitalism (now neoliberalism), as discussed by Angela McClanahan and Robert Davies? How do these stereotypes and values work in the present, how do they both produce and limit what we understand to constitute 'the north' in relative terms and how are these appropriated in space and time? Is the north finally becoming a more autonomous 'field of dreams' with new cultural and economic possibilities for its inhabitants, and is it time to stop romanticizing industrial heritage? How is it to be defined regionally and what are the cultural practices that will both characterize *and* produce it if Scotland becomes an independent nation?

### Neoliberalism and futurity in the north

In a meta-sense, all these questions relate to a broader concern with what a future beyond post-Fordism, postmodernism and the digital economy may hold. In the arts, social sciences and humanities, and more generally in relation to the networks that shape, infuse and facilitate geopolitics across the world, there has been a significant turn, over the last few years, to the theme of 'futurity' in critical discourses within philosophy, art practice, art history and visual culture. Nevertheless, where concern with 'the future' in the work of modernist artists, theorists and scientists over the twentieth century implied faith in the associated technologies that, in their view, were associated with the evolutionary progression of human beings in time that might radically alter how we live, on earth and perhaps in frontier regions such as outer space, our concerns are tempered by caution about how we define 'progress'. Now, after post-modernism's notorious proclamation of the 'end of history', much social and cultural enquiry is infused with palpable anxieties about 'lost' futures, obliterated by the monolithic social, cultural and economic

systems under which we live. Emerging from thirty years of preoccupation with representation and subjectivity within art practice, philosophy, the humanities and social sciences more generally, there is now, under circumstances characterized by instability of the world economy and the earth's ecosystem itself, a return to universal 'big questions' in academic and public discourse about how globalization as well as neoliberalism affect people around the world, and a return to focusing on deep time and how, in scalar terms, human impact on the earth and human beings as a species could and should be examined.

Noteworthy contributions here include Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's volume *After the Future* and Mark Fisher's widely cited *Capitalist Realism*, as well as the rise of philosophical approaches and critical frameworks such as speculative realism and new materialism.<sup>2</sup> Such enquiries are of course related to broader developments in cybernetics, science and management studies, which have produced, and had vested interests in, areas of study such as 'futurology' and 'futures studies' since the mid-twentieth century. As widely discussed, the banking crisis of 2008 and the general deterritorialization of economies, technologies and liberal democracies under neoliberalism have led, as Neil Mulholland has recently argued, to the 'unravelling' of supposedly durable national entities such as 'Britain' and 'the UK' in the West, that, in our lifetimes at least, we have taken for granted.

So how do these concerns shape engagements and interests in 'northernness' in the UK? In a specific material and geographic sense, and perhaps in contrast to many of the valuable questions that have been raised over the last few years around 'lost futures' dissolved by globalization, commodification, spectacle and finance capital, we ask here about the possibilities emerging from the fallout of the recent ruptures in globalization for the UK north, a specific region, which, while still firmly under the grip of neoliberalism, may nevertheless be gaining traction as a new central social, economic and cultural region, both in the UK and more generally as a 'micro-nation' with strong (leftist) European social values, renewed economic and cultural links with Scandinavia and increasingly independent governance.

In the context of Britain, 'The North', in academic discourse, and as addressed by McClanahan in this issue, as well as by Holt in 2010, has tended to be written about in one of two ways. First, there is a tendency to focus on it as a place of resource-rich landscapes, cultural practices, histories and economies that are often understood and conceived as remote and 'wild', as well as aesthetically represented as romantic and sublime.<sup>3</sup> Second, and as discussed above, it tends also to be perceived as embodying the traditional imagery, cultural practices and values that coalesced around industrial production and the creation and expansion of the working class, all heavily aesthetically romanticized in artistic and cultural terms. These conceptions of Britain, as Fielding suggests, work both to produce and to reify the north as a particular 'region', in both real and imagined terms. Today, both these romantic views are used extensively as a kind of commodification exercise for the United Kingdom, seen especially in recent campaigns including references to 'Brand

Britain', used in the London 2012 Olympic advertising campaign as well as more generally. This is an inherently neoliberal view of territory, culture and governance.

For this issue of *Visual Culture in Britain*, then, a diverse collection of art works and essays have been selected that all in some way examine current cultural practices, images and philosophical conceptions of the 'North' in the UK, a region which we believe is central to the geopolitical, regional and local politics of this particular historical moment in Britain. This is in terms both of the rapid rate of economic change it seems to be undergoing in comparison with the UK south's changing micro-economy and political and cultural terrain, but also in its own cultural and historic terms, and in the communication and trade networks that increasingly flow to and from it. Some of these texts and images are experimental in terms of their presentation in an academic journal, particularly the iteration of Paul Rooney's video work *Feral Knowledge*, as well as Bryan McGovern Wilson and Robert Williams' images for their project Cumbrian Alchemy, coupled here with an essay by archaeologist David Barrowclough. These works in particular embody the very kinds of innovations and knowledge now producing the region as a more civic and autonomous place in geopolitical as well as regional and local terms.

### Visual and material culture in the 'UK North'

Returning to the poetry and literary work of William Blake through text and video, Rooney's *Feral Knowledge* engages again with the 'satanic mills' already discussed above, although in this iteration there is a much more abstract connection with the critique of 'reason' and rationality of Enlightenment thinking rooted in Blake's radical Christianity. It has long been speculated that Blake's 'mills', while, on the one hand, referring to actually existing, material factories in the physical landscapes of industrial Britain, also refer obliquely to the university, which of course is overtly engaged in philosophical critique and sceptical thinking, much of which questions the existence of God and has tended to put faith, particularly since the nineteenth century, in the ability of humankind to make logical, rational choices about its survival. Rooney's narrator, Jack, is an uncanny, ghostly autodidact that roams the streets of Yorkshire at night, haunts George, the recipient of the letter we read. Jack has a sophisticated command of ontological and epistemological positions and a curious habit of (purposefully?) misspelling words. He is scornful both of privilege and Enlightenment thinking, and is overtly interested both in existing knowledge and in producing new, alternative knowledge of and about the world. Today, privilege, both social and economic, is, of course, increasingly (and again) being welcomed by UK universities as institutions whose state funding has been cut drastically over the last two decades. This, of course, has an impact in terms of who is allowed to access knowledge through the payment of increasingly exorbitant tuition fees and manifests itself geographically in the UK as a sharp divide, reifying historic divisions between the more affluent south and the

northern regions of the UK. Additionally, 'alternative knowledge', of course, which Jack attempts to create, also tends to be rejected by academic institutions, which continue to reproduce normative worldviews driven by Western cultural and economic structures and narratives.

Cumbrian Alchemy, an art project conceived by Bryan McGovern Wilson and Robert Williams, and discussed in archaeological terms by David Barrowclough, is a speculative, interdisciplinary project that engages with current trends in 'futures studies' and speculative philosophy across the arts and humanities. It is essentially an experiment in semantic and image-based communication with imagined future subjects – human or otherwise – who may come to inhabit the region of Cumbria in distant future geologic epochs, after the abandonment or destruction of current human populations in the event of environmental catastrophe caused by the 'Anthropocene'<sup>4</sup> or, put simply, the inevitable return of the next ice age. In this project, the artists are experimenting with visual language that may be required to warn future inhabitants about the dangers of nuclear waste buried in the landscapes of northern England.

Penny Fielding's article engages with the role of history, literature, art practices and curating, as well as art 'economies', as *active agents* in the production of cultural and geographic 'regions' of the north in Britain. Here, she examines two noteworthy periods in the history of regions of the UK north, one related to oral and literary traditions of the borders region in Scotland, the other to curatorial practices and resource distribution and circulation around a particular art project that proclaims the 'Transpennine' region as a distinct micro-economy and community capable of producing and supporting contemporary art practices. Similarly, Louise Thody's investigation of both the visual and the material histories of Newcastle Brown Ale, as well as the product's appropriation within United States subculture, shows the product as visually and materially mediating cultural identities and practices, presented as, on the one hand, authentically embodying the histories, traditions and practices of a region characterized by 'working-class' values, while on the other, an industrial product that is no longer authentic or representative of traditional 'northern values'.

Finally, Robert Davies and Angela McClanahan both focus on a particular region of Edinburgh, where a regeneration project has displaced former working-class communities as well as revitalizing the aesthetics of the area to make it more akin to and consistent with the values embodied first by New Labour governments and, second and in a larger sense, the aesthetics of neoliberalism. McClanahan's article also examines how the exploration of such material forms, referred to most famously by Owen Hatherley as the 'New Ruins of Great Britain', helps us to think through, as do Fielding and Thody, how material forms mediate and produce regions and territories, as well as how the way 'ruins' have been studied and visualized in the north of Britain over the last 300 years tends to reify the region as romantic, sublime and emblematic of a deep past, or as embodying lost industrial futures. Additionally, by examining how prehistoric ruins are situated in networks of contemporary social



and economic relations, we can understand how they symbolise and embody 'value' in the 21st century.

### Time, materiality and the field of visual culture

Over and above the specificity of subject matter in each article, there are a number of epistemological and methodological themes running through this issue. First, all the images and texts in some way relate to *temporality* and the production of diverse scalar cultural forms in northern regions of the UK. Together, they demonstrate a rich diversity, missing in much contemporary discussion about the problem of 'the future'. Second, each submission is concerned with specific *materialities* associated with 'northern' identities, practices and economies, and how they are manifested at regional and 'local' levels, how they demonstrate the consumption and appropriation of 'northern' cultural practices elsewhere in the world, as well as how the field of *visual culture* itself helps to construct and reify 'the north' both as an historic and emerging cultural territory and as an academic field of enquiry.

All the texts and images presented here engage directly with the changing intellectual terrain of visual culture in broader terms, too. While it is obviously still heavily invested in subject matter such as aesthetics, and methodologies that engage in qualitative, sensual and visual analysis, there is an emerging 'material turn' within the discipline, which has a direct engagement with the materiality of art practices, but also with the wider visual world and the social, cultural and economic dimensions that shape it.

So, returning to the BANK image above, *would* we be concerned if one of these northerners ceased to exist? As 'the North' was crucial to the industrial revolution, the subsequent development of English capitalism and, ultimately, globalization and contemporary geopolitics, it is a timely question. Does the increasing autonomy of regions of northern England, and of course, the possible cession of Scotland from the UK, represent a gradual unravelling of the 'invention' of Britain, as Mulholland has suggested?<sup>5</sup> At the time of going to press, the results of the 2014 UK elections to the European Parliament have just been announced. A number of seats in the European parliament have been gained by the UK Independence Party, whose right-wing policies on immigration and stance against Britain's membership of the European Union may again contribute to the increasing political and cultural distinction between the north and south of Britain when set against the more left-wing social beliefs of many regions in the northern UK. In light of these seismic political shifts, the 'disappearance' of the north in Westphalian terms has now become a distinct possibility.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to Neil Mulholland, Ysanne Holt and all the authors who appear in this issue of *Visual Culture in Britain* for a number of discussions about current cultural practices and politics in the UK

north that have informed this introduction, and the issue as a whole. Thanks also to Simon Bedwell, John Russell and MOT International for allowing me to use the BANK images, which have provided a cogent visual platform for thinking about the north now.

#### Notes

- 1 I am referring here particularly to 'ruin porn', which is a particular aesthetic practice, usually involving artists who are interested in the aesthetics of industrial decay as photographic material, as well as 'urban explorers', a largely middle-class subculture which appropriates psychogeographic practices in engaging physically with sites of industrial and urban abandonment or restriction.
- 2 Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*.
- 3 See especially Davidson, *The Idea of North* and Holt and McClanahan, 'Northern Peripheries'.
- 4 The Anthropocene, or the 'age of the human', is a much debated, loosely defined geologic construct in which it is argued that human beings have, through the changes they have wrought on the ecosystems of the earth through production and consumption practices, contributed to the creation of a new geologic epoch. Crutzen and Stoermer, 'The Anthropocene'..
- 5 Mulholland, personal communication, 16 May 2014.

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Angela McClanahan teaches visual culture at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. Her primary research interests include examining how people engage with and construct meaning from the material world. Currently she is particularly interested in people's experience and the visual representation of 'contemporary' ruins in urban and rural contexts: that is, development sites that have been abandoned in the wake of the crisis of global capitalism. She is also interested in ideas about 'Northernness', and art as/and magic.